

Charges Link Between Reds, Freedom Riders

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Brig.

Gen. T. B. Birdsong, head of the Mississippi highway patrol, charged Thursday "Freedom Riders" were "directed, inspired and planned by known Communists."

The charge brought an almost immediate denial from a New York official of the Congress of Racial Equality.

Birdsong told a news conference at least two riders arrested during efforts to desegregate Jackson transportation facilities attended a soviet-directed seminar in Cuba last February.

He said 202 American students made the trip to Havana and were "taught" by nine officials of Soviet Russia "to teach the students how to make sit-ins, walk-ins, kneel-ins and Freedom Rides."

Two Answer Questions

The news conference was conducted at the highway patrol headquarters here by Birdsong after a brief statement on one rider's background was handed to newsmen. Birdsong and Art Richardson, patrol public information officer, both answered questions in Birdsong's name.

Birdsong told newsmen the Congress of Racial Equality was responsible for the freedom rides and was a Communist front group.

Earlier this week, Gordon Carey of New York, field director of CORE, told newsmen here he planned the rides in February.

Birdsong said other Freedom Riders had records of auto theft, burglary, grand larceny and undesirable discharges from military service. He did not identify those riders.

Some, he said, were "communist backed, pawns in the hands of Communist powers that be."

Birdsong, a retired Mississippi National Guard officer and founder of the highway patrol 25 years ago, said the two riders who had attended the Havana meeting were:

Katherine Pleune, 31-year-old white mimeograph operator from Chicago, arrested on breach of peace charges when she arrived as a Freedom Rider June 10.

And James Robert Wahlstrom, 24-year-old University of Wisconsin student from Madison, arrested with a group of riders June 6.

Both were convicted and Miss Pleune is serving a four-month sentence at the state penitentiary. Wahlstrom received a four-month sentence, with two suspended, and is free on a \$300 appeal bond. Each also was fined \$200.

Birdsong said Miss Pleune told investigators she was among the students, but that she refused to answer when asked what the group of students discussed in Cuba or why they were there. She also refused to identify anyone else in the group.

In commenting today in New York on the charges, Carey said CORE knew that Miss Pleune was in Cuba.

"We also know that no training session in non-violence and in the techniques of sitting in or freedom riding was held," he said.

The patrol chief did not disclose the source of his information, but said his investigators had worked with police agencies in 14 other states.

Miss Pleune refused to say whether she was a member of the Communist party unless her attorney was present, Birdsong said, and she declined to say whether she had talked to a "known communist" on grounds that "the FBI might intimidate him."

Under FBI Surveillance

The Communist, Birdsong said, was under surveillance by the FBI and his name was being withheld because his arrest was expected.

He said Miss Pleune told officers "she does not now believe in God" and "she was not taught to believe in God and did not receive a Christian upbringing."

She told investigators, he said, she had been "arrested several times" in Chicago for picketing (possibly as many as 100-150 times). She was also arrested in New York city and San Francisco for picketing. She has picketed the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and for racial integration.

Birdsong said the highway patrol had set up a special section to deal with Communist influences after digging into the backgrounds of the riders.

He said many of them had declined to say whether they belonged to the Communist party.

He said the charge "is so ridiculous as to merit no reply. However, because the reputation of a group of imprisoned Freedom Riders is at stake, the Congress of Racial Equality feels compelled to answer briefly."

"The Freedom Riders have no connection whatsoever with the Communist party in this nation or any other. They are taking action because the aspirations of the American Negro have been so denied, and stifled by un-American states such as Mississippi, which has systematically denied American citizens of color their constitutional rights."

He called Birdsong's statement a "sneer campaign."

He said riders who had been earlier were critical of the movement.

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